Russian fairy tale

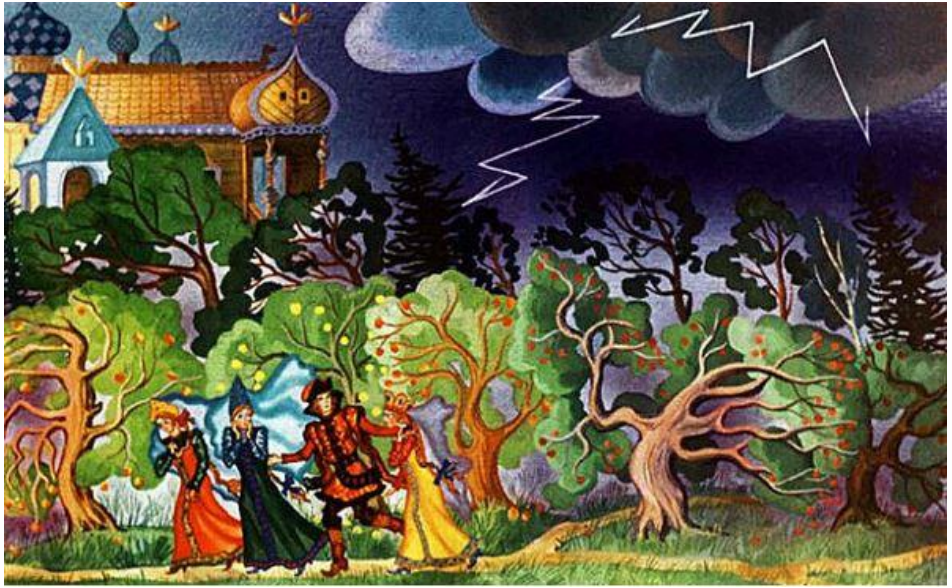
Marya Morevna the Lovely Tsarevna

In a certain tsardom, in a certain realm, there once lived the son of a Tsar, Tsarevich Ivan by name, and his three sisters. The first was called Tsarevna

Marya, the second, Tsarevna Olga, and the third, Tsarevna Anna.

Their mother and father were dead. On their deathbed they said to their son:

“Do not keep your sisters long unwed, but marry them off to whoever comes to woo them first.”



Tsarevich Ivan buried his parents and, to try and wear off his sorrow, he went with his sisters for a walk in their green garden.

All of a sudden a black cloud came over the sky. A terrible storm was about to break.

“Come, sisters, let us go home,” said Tsarevich Ivan.

No sooner had they reached the palace than the thunder crashed, the ceiling was rent in two, and a Falcon flew into the chamber. He struck the floor, turned into a tall and handsome youth, and said:

“Good morrow to you, Tsarevich Ivan. Many is the time I came to your house as a guest, but now I am here as a wooer. For I wish to ask for the hand of your sister, Tsarevna Marya, in marriage.”

“If my sister likes you, wel! and good, for I’ll not force her will. She can marry you if so she chooses.”

And Tsarevna Marya being willing, the Falcon married her and carried her off to his tsardom.

Day followed day, and hour followed hour, and a whole year went by before ever they knew it. Tsarevich Ivan and his two sisters went for a walk in the green garden, and again a black cloud covered the sky, the lightning flared, and a fierce wind began to blow.

“Come, sisters, let us go home,” said Tsarevich Ivan.

No sooner had they reached the palace than the thunder crashed the roof caved in, the ceiling was rent in two, and an Eagle came flying in. He struck the floor and turned into a tall and handsome youth.

“Good morrow, Tsarevich Ivan,” said he. “Many is the time I came here as a guest, but now I come as a wooer.”

And he asked for the hand of Tsarevna Olga in marriage.

Said Tsarevich Ivan:

“If Tsarevna Olga likes you, you can have her. For I would not force her will.”

Tsarevna Olga gave her consent and married the Eagle. And the Eagle caught her up and carried her off to his tsardom.

Another year passed by and Tsarevich Ivan said to his youngest sister:

“Come, sister, let us take a walk in the green garden.”

They walked a little while, and again a black cloud covered the sky, the lightning flared, and a fierce wind began to blow.

“Let us go home, sister!” said Tsarevich Ivan.

They came home, and before they had had time to sit down, the thunder crashed, the ceiling was rent in two, and a Raven came flying in. He struck the floor and turned into a tall and handsome youth.

The other two were likely young men enough, but this one was even more so.

“Many is the time I came here as a guest, but now I come as a wooer,” said the Raven. “Let me have Tsarevna Anna in marriage.”

“My sister is free to do as she wills. If she likes you, she can marry you.”

So Tsarevna Anna married the Raven, and he carried her off to his tsardom. Tsarevich Ivan was left all by himself.

He lived alone for a whole year, and he missed his sisters very much.

“I think I shall go and look for my sisters,” said he.

He made ready and set off on his journey. He rode and he rode, and by and by he came to a field where a whole host of warriors lay routed and dead.

“If there is a man left alive among you, let him answer me!” Tsarevich Ivan called out. “For I wish to know who it was that vanquished this mighty host.”

And the only living man there replied:

“This whole mighty host was vanquished by Marya Morevna the Lovely Tsarevna.”

Tsarevich Ivan rode on, and after a while he came upon a number of white tents set up in a field, and there, coming out to meet him, was Marya Morevna the Lovely Tsarevna.

“Good morrow, Tsarevich,” said she. “Whither are you bound? Do you come of your own free will or on another’s errand?”

Said Tsarevich Ivan in reply:

“Hale and hearty young men like myself never go anywhere but of their own free will.”

“Well, if you are in no great haste, then be my guest and bide in my tent a while.”

This Tsarevich Ivan was pleased to do. For two days and two nights he was Marya Morevna's guest, and so well did they like one another that they decided to marry then and there. Thus it was that Tsarevich Ivan and Marya Morevna the Lovely Tsarevna became man and wife, and he went with her to her far-off tsardom.

They lived together for a time till one day Marya Morevna bethought her of setting out again for the wars. She left her palace and everything in it in the care of Tsarevich Ivan and, pointing out a room to him the door of which was locked fast, said:

"Go all over and look after everything, but mind you never look into this one room."

But Tsarevich Ivan's curiosity got the better of him and, as soon as Marya Morevna had left, he hurried to the room and opened the door. He looked in, and what did he see but Koshchei the Deathless hanging there, chained to the wall with twelve chains.

Said Koshchei the Deathless in pleading tones:

"Take pity on me, Tsarevich Ivan, and give me some water to drink. For ten years have I been held here and such have been my torments as cannot be described. I have had no food and nothing to drink, and my throat is all dry and parched."

Tsarevich Ivan gave him a whole pailful of water to drink, and he drank it down and began to plead for more.

“One pail is not enough, I am still thirsty, so do let me have another,” he begged.

Tsarevich Ivan gave him a second pail of water, and Koshchei gulped it down and asked for a third. But when he had finished his third pailful he got back all of his former strength, and he shook his chains and broke all the twelve of them.

“Thank you, Tsarevich Ivan,” said Koshchei the Deathless. “Now you will never see Marya Morevna, no more than you can see your own ears.”

And he flew out the window as swiftly as a whirlwind, caught up Marya Morevna the Lovely Tsarevna on the road and carried her off with him.

Tsarevich Ivan wept long and bitterly, and then he made ready and set off in search of Marya Morevna.

“Come what may, I shall find her!” said he.

A day passed by, and a second, and at dawn on the third day Tsarevich Ivan saw a beautiful palace before him.

Beside the palace there grew an oak, and on its bough there perched a Falcon. The Falcon flew off the oak, struck the ground and turned into a handsome youth.

“Ah, my own dear brother-in-law, I am indeed glad to see you!” he cried.

Hearing him, Tsarevna Marya ran out to meet her brother. She welcomed him joyously, asked after his health and began to tell him how she lived and fared. Tsarevich Ivan spent three days with them and then he said:

“I cannot stay with you longer. I am seeking my wife, Marya Morevna the Lovely Tsarevna.”

“It won’t be easy to find her,” the Falcon told him. “Leave your silver spoon here just in case. We shall look at it and think of you.”

Tsarevich Ivan left his silver spoon with the Falcon and set off on his journey.

He rode for a day, he rode for another day, and at dawn on the third day he saw a palace which was even more beautiful than the Falcon's. Beside the palace there grew an oak, and on its bough there perched an Eagle.

The Eagle flew off the tree, struck the ground and, turning into a handsome youth, cried:

"Come, Tsarevna Olga, get up, for our own dear brother is here!"

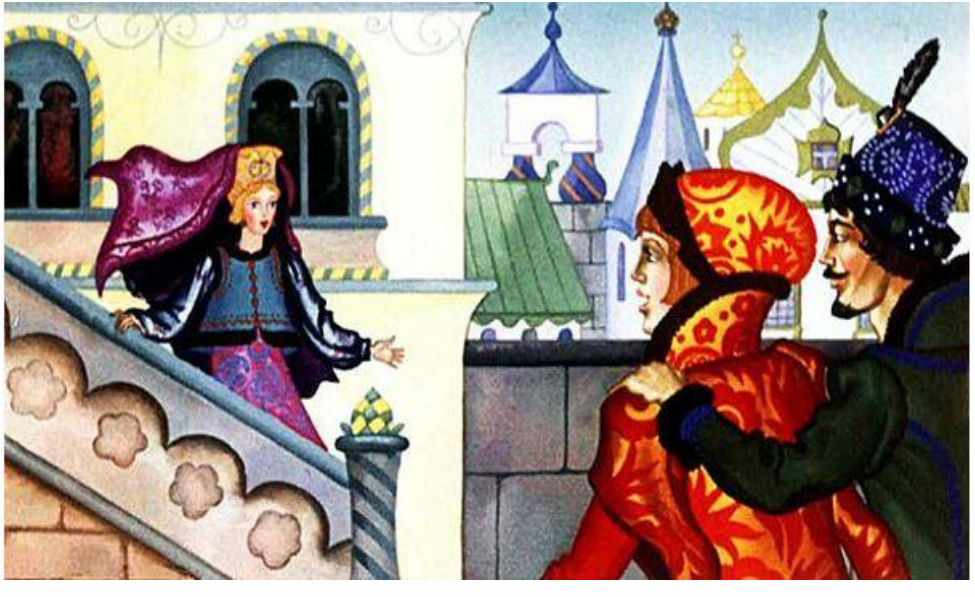
Hearing him. Tsarevna Olga came running out of the palace. She began to kiss and embrace Tsarevich Ivan, to ask after his health and to tell him how she lived and fared. Tsarevich Ivan spent three days with them and then he said:

“I cannot bide with you longer. I am seeking my wife, Marya Morevna the Lovely Tsarevna.”

Said the Eagle:

“It will not be easy to find her. Leave your silver fork with us. We shall look at it and think of you.”

So Tsarevich Ivan left his silver fork with them and went on his way.



He rode for a day, he rode for another day, and at dawn on the third day he saw a palace which far surpassed the first two in beauty and splendour. Beside the palace there grew an oak, and on its bough there perched a Raven.

The Raven flew off the oak, struck the ground and, turning into a handsome youth, cried:

“Tsarevna Anna, make haste and come, our own dear brother is here!”

Hearing him. Tsarevna Anna came running out of the palace. She welcomed Tsarevich Ivan joyously, kissed and embraced him, asked after his health and began to tell him how she lived and fared.

Tsarevich Ivan spent three days with them, and then he said:

"I must bid you good-bye, for I am off to seek my wife, Marya Morevna the Lovely Tsarevna."

Said the Raven in reply:

"It will not be easy to find her. Leave your silver snuff-box with us. We shall look at it and think of you."

Tsarevich Ivan gave him his silver snuff-box and, taking leave of them both, went on his way.

A day passed by, and another and, on the third day, Tsarevich Ivan finally found his beloved.

When she saw him, Marya Morevna threw her arms around Tsarevich Ivan, burst into tears and said:

“Ah, Tsarevich Ivan, why did you not listen to me but opened the room where Koshchei the Deathless was kept and let him out?”

“Forgive me, Marya Morevna, and let bygones be bygones. Come away with me while Koshchei the Deathless is nowhere to be seen and perhaps he will not overtake us.”

So they made ready and rode away together.

And Koshchei the Deathless was out hunting. It was evening by the time he turned his way homewards, and his goodly horse stumbled under him.

“Why do you stumble, you old bag of bones?” he asked. “Is it that you sense some misfortune?”

Said the horse in reply:

“Tsarevich Ivan came, and he carried off Marya Morevna.”

“Can we catch them up?”

“If we were to sow some wheat, wait till it ripened, reap and thresh it and grind it into flour, bake five ovenfuls of bread, and not go after them till we had eaten it all up, we should still catch them up.”

So Koshchei the Deathless sent his horse into a gallop, and he caught up Tsarevich Ivan.

"I'll forgive you this first time," said he, "for you were kind to me, you gave me water to drink, and I'll forgive you a second time, but if you dare to go against me a third time, then I'll hack you to pieces."

And he took Marya Morevna from him and rode away with her, and Tsarevich Ivan sat down on a stone by the side of the road and began to cry.

He wept and he sobbed, and then he went back again for Marya Morevna. And Koshchei the Deathless happened to be away from home as before.

“Come with me, Marya Morevna,” said Tsarevich Ivan.

“Ah, Tsarevich Ivan, he will overtake us again!”

“Let him. We shall at least have spent an hour or two together!”

So they made ready and rode away.

By and by Koshchei the Deathless turned his way homewards, and his goodly horse stumbled under him.

“You old bag of bones you, why do you stumble? Is it that you sense some misfortune?” asked he.

“Tsarevich Ivan came, and he carried Marya Morevna off with him.”

“Can we catch them up?”

“If we were to sow some barley, wait till it ripened, reap and thresh it, brew beer out of it, drink till we were drunk and not go after them till we had slept it off, we should still catch them up.”

So Koshchei the Deathless put his horse into a gallop, and he caught up Tsarevich Ivan.

"I told you you would no more see Marya Morevna than your own ears," said he.

And he took her away from Tsarevich Ivan and carried her off with him.

Tsarevich Ivan was left alone, he wept and he cried, and then he went back again for Marya Morevna. And Koshchei the Deathless happened to be away as before.

"Come with me, Marya Morevna," said Tsarevich Ivan.

"Ah, Tsarevich Ivan, he will overtake us and hack you to pieces!"

"Let him! I cannot live without you."

So they made ready and rode away. By and by Koshchei the Deathless turned his way homewards, and his goodly horse stumbled under him.

“Why do you stumble? Is it that you sense some misfortune?” he asked.

“Tsarevich Ivan came, and he took Marya Morevna away.”

So Koshchei galloped after Tsarevich Ivan and, when he had caught him up, hacked him to pieces. He put the pieces in a tarred barrel, bound the barrel with iron hoops and threw it in the blue sea. And he carried Marya Morevna off with him again.

Now at this self-same time the silver things Tsarevich Ivan had left with his brothers-in-law turned dark and tarnished.

“Oh,” said the brothers-in-law, “Tsarevich Ivan must have met with some misfortune.”

So the Eagle swooped down on to the blue sea, seized the barrel and carried it out on to the shore.

The Falcon flew after living water, and the Raven flew after dead water, and the two of them came flying back to where the Eagle was waiting for them. They broke up the barrel, took out the pieces into which Tsarevich Ivan’s body had been hacked, washed them and put them all together properly.

The Raven sprayed the pieces with dead water, and they grew fast to one another, and then the Falcon sprayed them with living water, and Tsarevich Ivan rose with a start and said:

“Ah, what a long sleep I have had!”

“You would have slept longer if it were not for us,” his brothers-in-law replied. “And now come and be our guest.”

“No, my brothers, I must go to seek Marya Morevna.”

Off he went, he found Marya Morevna and said to her:

“Ask Koshchei the Deathless where it was he got himself such a fine horse.”

And Marya Morevna bided her chance and then she asked Koshchei the Deathless about his horse.

Said Koshchei the Deathless:

“Beyond the Thrice-Nine Lands, in the Thrice-Ten Tsardom there lives Baba-Yaga the Witch. She lives in the forest beyond the Flaming River, and she has a mare on which she flies round the world every day. She has other fine mares too. I tended them for three days, and I let not a single mare run off, so Baba-Yaga gave me a colt in reward for my services.”

“How did you manage to cross the Flaming River?”

“With the help of my magic kerchief. I have only to wave it thrice to the right of me, and a very tall bridge will rise up that the flames cannot reach.”

Marya Morevna heard him out and she passed on every word to Tsarevich Ivan. And she carried off Koshchei's magic kerchief too and gave it to him.

Tsarevich Ivan crossed the Flaming River and made for Baba-Yaga's house. He walked for a long, long time without food or drink, and then he came upon a strange bird and her brood.

Said Tsarevich Ivan:

"I think I shall eat one of the chicks."

"Do not touch my chicks, Tsarevich Ivan," said the bird in pleading tones. "Who knows but you might have need of me some day!"

Tsarevich Ivan walked on and, by and by, he came upon a beehive in the forest.

"I think I shall take some honey," said he.

But the bee queen began to plead with him and said:

"Do not touch my honey, Tsarevich Ivan. Who knows but you might have need of me some day!"

Tsarevich Ivan did not touch the honey, but walked on.

By and by he came upon a lioness and her cub.

Said Tsarevich Ivan:

“I think I shall at least eat up that lion cub there. I am so hungry that I can hardly stand on my legs.”

“Do not touch my cub,” said the lioness in pleading tones. “Who knows but you might have need of me some day!”

“Very well, let it be as you ask.”

And he walked on, as hungry as ever. He came to Baba-Yaga's house, and there were twelve poles round the house, and human heads were stuck on eleven of them.

“Good morrow, Grandma!” said Tsarevich Ivan to Baba-Yaga.

“Good morrow to you, Tsarevich Ivan. What brings you here? Do you come because it pleases you or is it that you have need of me?”

“I come to offer you my services and to earn one of your fine steeds in reward.”

“Very well, Tsarevich Ivan. It is not for a year, but for only three days that you must serve me. If you keep my mares safe, you shall have one of my fine steeds. If you don’t, then your head will crown the last pole of the twelve, and you’ll only have yourself to blame.”

They struck a bargain, and Baba-Yaga gave Tsarevich Ivan food and drink and told him to set to work. No sooner had Tsarevich Ivan driven the mares to pasture than they lifted their tails and ran off every which way across the meadows, and before he could raise his eyes to see where they went they were gone out of sight. Tsarevich Ivan sorrowed and wept, and then he sat down on a stone and fell asleep.

The sun was setting when the strange bird came flying up.

“Wake up, Tsarevich Ivan,” said she. “The mares are all back in their stalls.”

Tsarevich Ivan rose and went home, and Baba-Yaga made a great to-do and she shouted at her mares and scolded them.

“Why did you come back home?” she demanded of them.

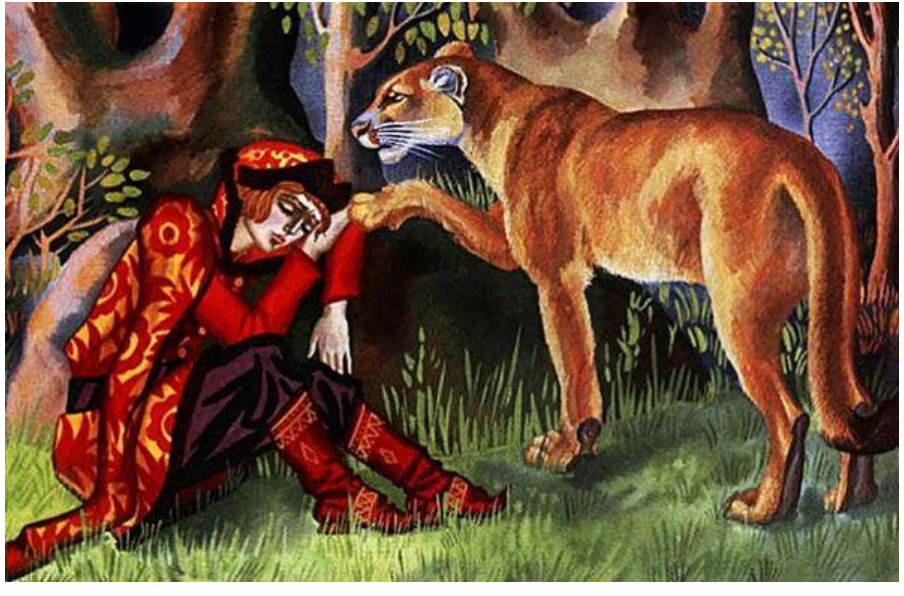
“What else could we do? The birds came flying from all over the earth and they nearly plucked out our eyes.”

“Well, don’t run over the meadows tomorrow, but scatter in the dense forests.”

Tsarevich Ivan slept the night through and, in the morning, Baba-Yaga said to him:

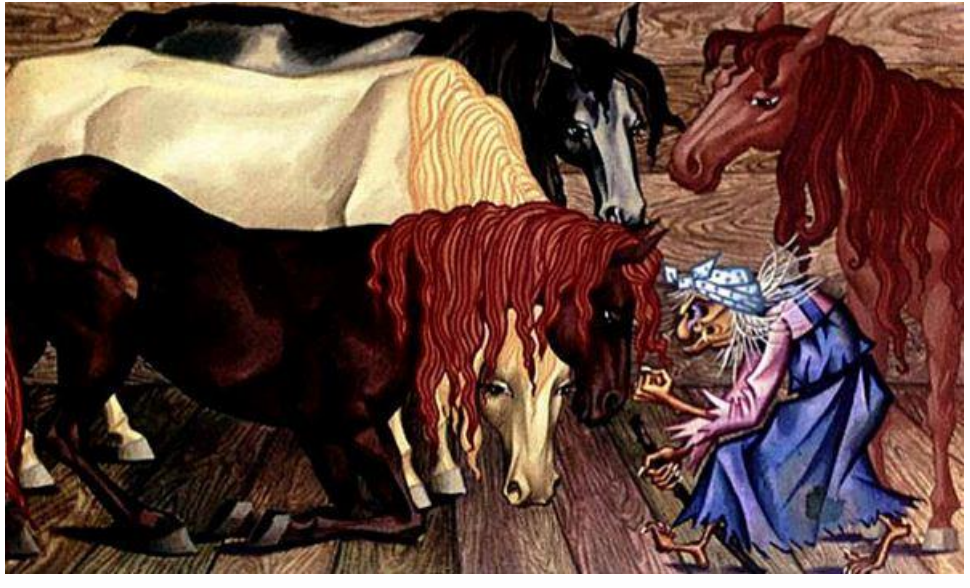
"Take care, Tsarevich Ivan. If you do not keep my mares safe but lose a single one of them, your head will crown the pole."

Tsarevich Ivan drove the mares out to pasture, and they at once lifted their tails and ran off into the dense forests. And Tsarevich Ivan sat down on a stone, he wept and he cried, and he fell asleep.



The sun had already sunk beyond the forest when the lioness came running.

"Wake up, Tsarevich Ivan," said she. "All the mares are back in their stalls."

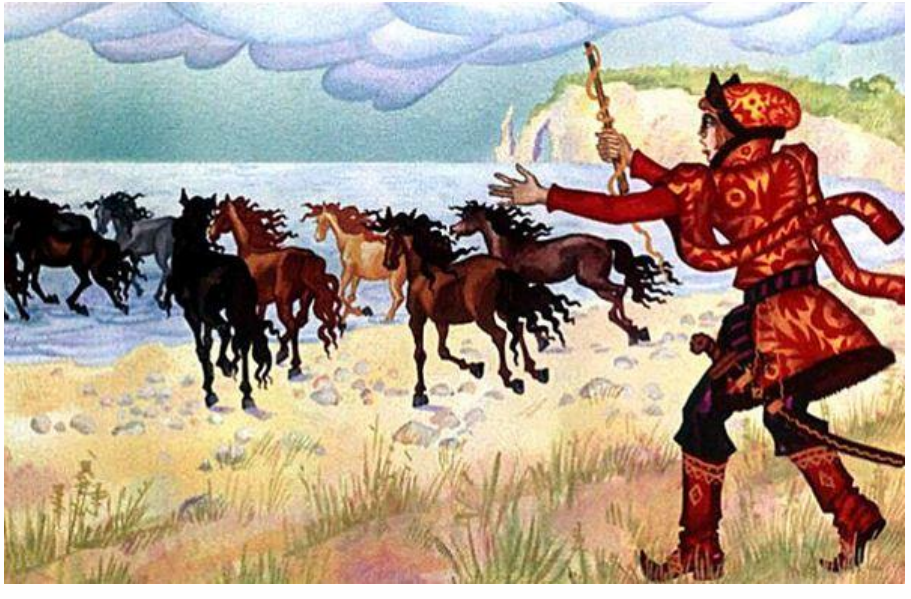


Tsarevich Ivan got up and went home. And Baba-Yaga made a great to-do, she shouted at her mares and scolded them harder than ever.

“Why did you come back home?” she demanded of them.

“What else could we do? The fiercest beasts from all over the earth came running, and they very nearly tore us to shreds!”

“Well, run and hide in the blue sea tomorrow.”



Tsarevich Ivan slept the night through and in the morning Baba-Yaga sent him off to pasture her mares again.

“If you don’t keep them safe, your head will crown the pole,” said she.

Tsarevich Ivan drove the mares to pasture in the field, and at once they lifted their tails and vanished from sight. Into the blue sea they ran, and they stood up to their necks in the water.

Tsarevich Ivan sat down on a stone, he wept and he cried, and he fell asleep.

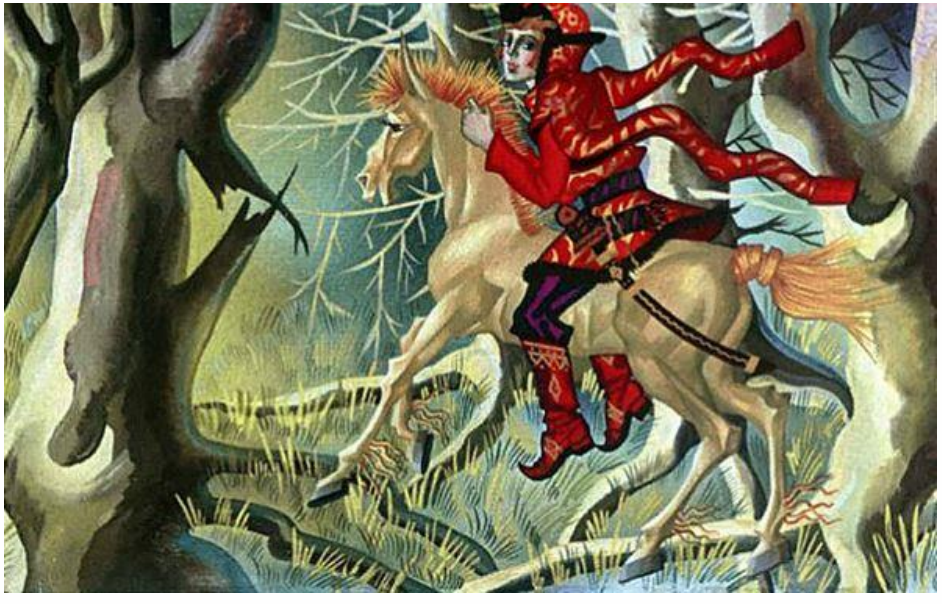
By and by the bee came flying up and said:

“Wake up, Tsarevich Ivan, all the mares are back in their stalls. Only mind, when you get back to her house, do not show yourself to Baba-Yaga, but go to the stable and hide behind the crib. There is a mangy colt there wallowing in the dung. Take him, and in the deep of night leave the house.”

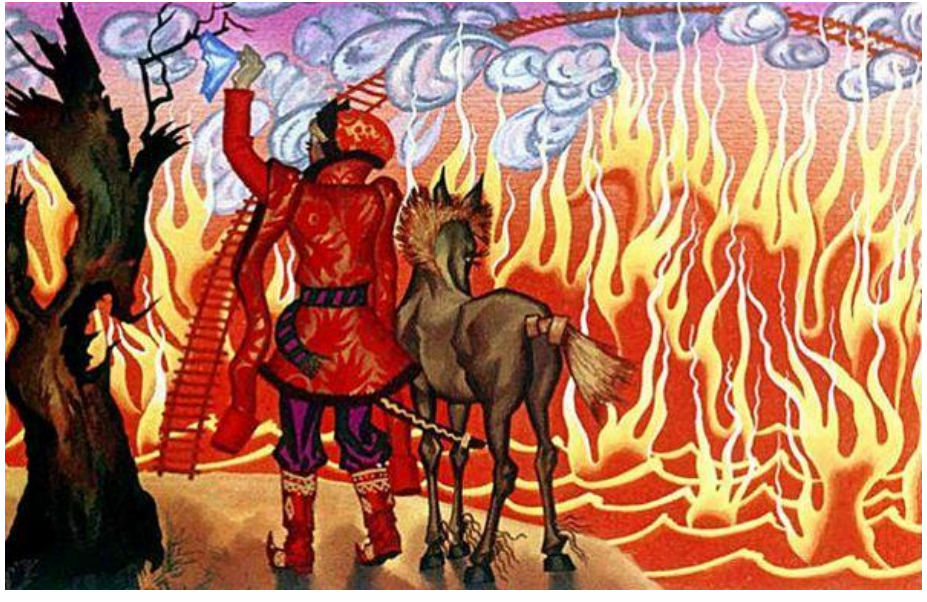
Tsarevich Ivan rose, he stole into the stable and lay down behind the crib. And all the while Baba-Yaga was shouting at the top of her voice and berating her mares.

“Why did you come back?” she demanded of them.

“What else could we do? Swarms of bees came flying from every corner of the earth and they stung us all over till the blood showed.”



Baba-Yaga went to bed and fell asleep, and on the stroke of midnight Tsarevich Ivan saddled her mangiest colt and rode to the Flaming River.



When he reached the river he waved his magic kerchief thrice to the right of him and, lo and behold! — there before him, spanning the river, was a fine, tall bridge.

Tsarevich Ivan rode across and waved his kerchief twice to the left of him and instead of the fine, tall bridge there appeared a poor, low, narrow one.

In the morning Baba-Yaga woke up and, seeing that her mangy colt was gone, she rushed off in pursuit. Like the wind she went in her iron mortar, using her pestle for a whip and sweeping the tracks away with her broom.

She flew to the Flaming River, took one look and said to herself:

"A bridge. Just what I need!"

And she started off across the bridge. But just when she had reached its very middle, the bridge broke down under her, and Baba-Yaga fell in the river. And so that was how she met her end, and a cruel end it was.

And Tsarevich Ivan pastured his colt in the lush, green meadows, and the colt grew into a strong and handsome steed.

Then Tsarevich Ivan rode to the house of Koshchei the Deathless, and out ran Marya Morevna the Lovely Tsarevna and she threw her arms around his neck.

‘‘How ever did you manage to escape death?” she asked him.

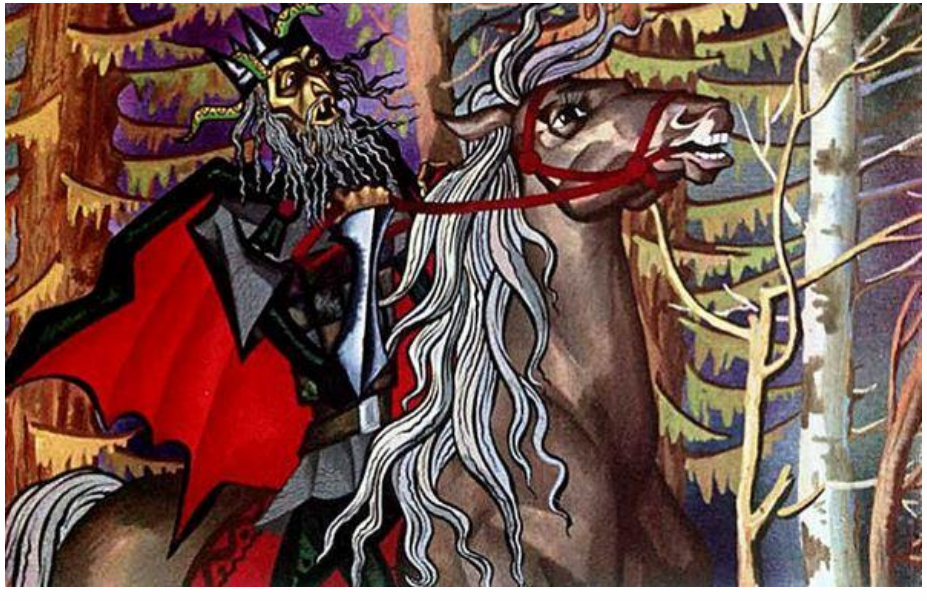
And nothing would do but he must tell her all about it.

“And now you must come away with me,” said Tsarevich Ivan.

“I’m afraid, Tsarevich Ivan! If Koshchei overtakes us, he’ll chop you to pieces again!”

“He’ll not catch us up this time. For I have a fine, strong steed that flies like the wind.”

And they mounted the steed and rode away.



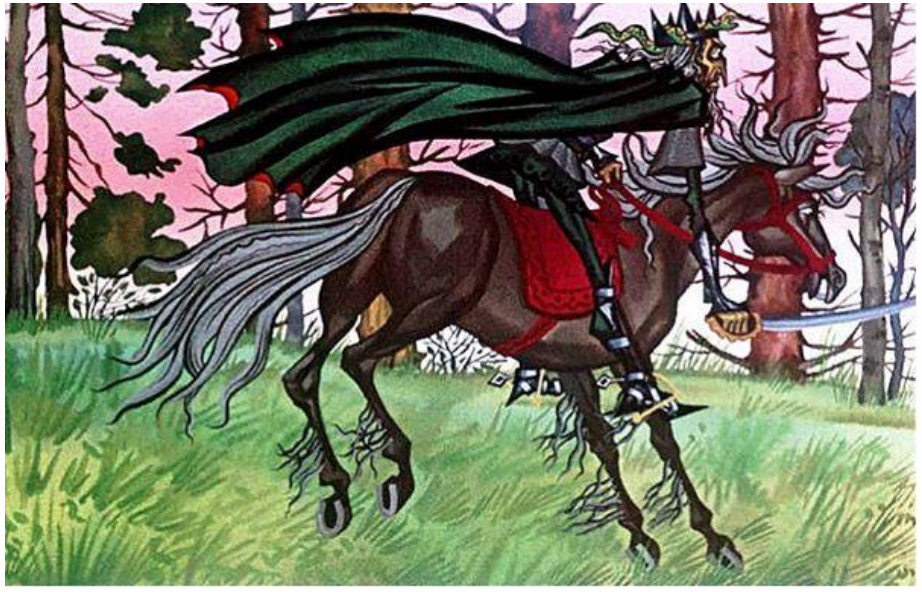
By and by Koshchei the Deathless turned his way homewards, and his horse stumbled under him.

"Why do you stumble, you old bag of bones?" he asked him.

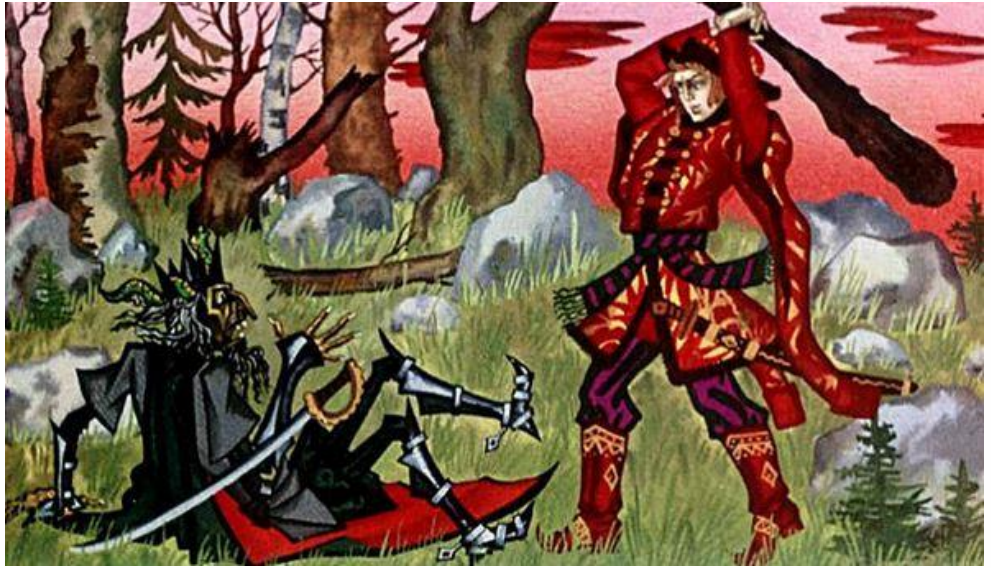
"Tsarevich Ivan came, and he carried off Marya Morevna," the horse replied.

"Can we catch them up?"

"I cannot say, for now Tsarevich Ivan has a horse as fine as I am, or better."



"I shan't let it rest at that," said Koshchei the Deathless.
"I'll go after them!"



Whether a long time passed by or a little time no one knows, but he caught up Tsarevich Ivan and, jumping to the ground, was about to pierce him with his sharp sword. But before he could do it, Tsarevich Ivan's horse struck him with his hoof with all his might and smashed his head, and Tsarevich Ivan finished him off with his cudgel.

After that Tsarevich Ivan piled up a heap of wood and made up a fire. He burnt up the body of Koshchei the Deathless, and he strewed his ashes in the wind.

Marya Morevna mounted Koshchei’s horse,

Tsarevich Ivan mounted his own, and away they rode.

First, they went to see the Raven, then the Eagle and then the Falcon. And they were welcomed with joy by all three.

“Ah, Tsarevich Ivan, we had lost all hope of ever seeing you!” they all said. “But at least all your troubles have not been in vain. If you searched the world over you could not find a bride as lovely as Marya Morevna!”

Tsarevich Ivan and Marya Morevna feasted and made merry for a time, and then they went back to their own tsardom. And there they lived in health and in cheer for many a long and prosperous year, never knowing hunger or need, but drinking their fill of ale and of mead.

Translated by Irina Zheleznova

Illustrated by G. Gorodnicheva